

VZCZCXRO7902
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHKU #0172/01 0361252
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051252Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8214
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000172

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: MIXED REVIEWS ON SHAYKH SABAH'S FIRST YEAR AS AMIR

REF: A. KUWAIT 56 - PARLIAMENT TO GRILL RULING FAMILY
MINISTER
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 32 - OPPOSITION ALLIANCE CRACKS
[1](#)C. 06 KUWAIT 4665 - INFORMATION MINISTER RESIGNS
[1](#)D. 06 KUWAIT 4430 - RUMBLINGS OF ANOTHER DISSOLUTION
[1](#)E. 06 KUWAIT 2971 - PARLIAMENT APPROVES FIVE
DISTRICTS
[1](#)F. 06 KUWAIT 1529 - COURT REVOKES FREEDOM
RESTRICTING GATHERINGS LAW
[1](#)G. 06 KUWAIT 768 - PARLIAMENT PASSES NEW PRESS AND
PUBLICATIONS LAW
[1](#)H. 06 KUWAIT 259 - EXPECTED SUCCESSION TIMELINE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Matt Tueller for reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary: January 29 marked Shaykh Sabah's first anniversary as Amir. He has presided over an historic year during which Kuwait experienced several significant developments, including the constitutional dissolution of Parliament and new elections in which women participated both as voters and candidates for the first time in Kuwait's history. However, changes over the past year have been driven primarily by pro-reform, opposition elements, not the Al-Sabah leadership. The Government poorly handled several confrontations with Parliament, which it ultimately lost, tarnishing its reputation and emboldening opposition elements. In addition, the ruling family's reputation was sullied when its internal conflicts were aired publicly during last January's succession crisis, and members of the Al-Sabah family were the target of harsh criticism during the election campaigns last June. There is a prevailing sense here that Kuwait is falling behind other Gulf countries, something most Kuwaitis blame on their leadership for failing to wisely invest the country's oil revenues, stem rampant corruption, implement much-needed reforms, and outline a clear vision for the country's future. Some, however, argue that Parliament is at fault and suggest privately that an unconstitutional dissolution would free the Government to address the country's problems. Despite their criticisms, few Kuwaitis openly advocate any major change in the Al-Sabah's leadership role in the country. Shaykh Sabah's challenge now is clear: to present a broadly appealing vision for Kuwait's future and sell it to an increasingly assertive and uncooperative Parliament while at the same time navigating through regional tensions. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C/NF) January 29 marked the first anniversary of Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's ascension to the emirate. Although media reports on the occasion were predictably laudatory, in private Kuwaitis expressed mixed opinions about his performance. While praising Kuwait's current economic prosperity, driven largely by high oil prices, they criticized the leadership for failing to use these resources wisely, curb rampant government corruption, institute much-needed administrative reforms, and outline a clear vision for the country's future. As one prominent liberal

remarked to Poloffs, "There is someone driving, but they are careening all over the road."

A Year of Rapid Change, Mounting Frustration

13. (C/NF) It has been an historic year in Kuwait. In January 2006, former Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah became Amir after a two-week long succession controversy between the two main branches of the Al-Sabah family: the Al-Jabers and the Al-Salems, which have traditionally alternated in holding the country's top leadership position. When then Crown Prince Shaykh Saad (Al-Salem), who was seriously ill, refused to abdicate, Shaykh Sabah (Al-Jaber) took the issue to Parliament, which per constitutional procedures voted that Shaykh Saad was medically incapable of holding the position of Amir. On becoming Amir, Shaykh Sabah further marginalized the Al-Salem branch by appointing his half-brother Shaykh Nawaf as Crown Prince and his nephew Shaykh Nasser Mohammed as Prime Minister, giving the Al-Jaber branch control of the country's top three posts for the first time in Kuwait's history. While the controversy was resolved peacefully, it seriously tarnished the reputation of the ruling family whose usually private internal rifts were starkly exposed in public.

14. (C/NF) Many Kuwaitis were hopeful Shaykh Sabah would usher in much-needed reforms. Parliament's passage of a new press and publications law in March and the Constitutional Court's revocation of a law restricting public gatherings in May were seen as positive steps in this direction. Buoyed by these developments, pro-reform parliamentarians and activists began demanding electoral reforms to reduce corruption and ruling family meddling in elections. The Government handled this challenge poorly, changing its position on the issue

KUWAIT 00000172 002 OF 003

several times before finally referring its own draft electoral reform bill to the Constitutional Court. This mismanagement drove disparate opposition elements together and added fuel to the popular drive for electoral reform. When forced to make a decision, the Amir exercised his constitutional right to dissolve Parliament and called for new elections in June. Observers noted wryly that this was his Parliament: the one he ran as Prime Minister from 2003 to 2006 and the one that nominally handed him the position of Amir.

15. (C/NF) The elections saw unprecedented criticism of the ruling family and resulted in a sweeping victory for pro-reform, opposition candidates. The pro-Government bloc in Parliament shrunk from 18 to 12 MPs, despite the ruling family's widely alleged efforts to manipulate the outcome of the elections. As a result, the Prime Minister was forced to exclude two controversial ministers, including the Amir's nephew, Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd, from the new Cabinet and support the passage of the electoral reform legislation the Government originally opposed, two major victories for pro-reform parliamentarians. This made the Government look weak and incompetent, and emboldened opposition groups, who became more assertive in Parliament. A loose alliance of opposition MPs formed a majority in Parliament, making it difficult for the Government to pass legislation it introduced. With the opposition alliance now fracturing, Kuwaitis have increasingly blamed both the Government and Parliament for this political deadlock.

16. (C/NF) In November, rumors surfaced that the Amir had openly discussed dissolving Parliament unconstitutionally for a period of up to three years, an indication of the leadership's frustration with the lack of political cooperation. Opposition parliamentarians backed down some, but not much: one month later they forced the Minister of Information to resign rather than undergo an intense parliamentary questioning session, a constitutional measure commonly referred to here as a "grilling." Several opposition MPs are now planning to grill the Amir's nephew,

the Minister of Health, and even more grillings are threatened. One Kuwaiti political observer told Poloff that some ruling family members, particularly from the Al-Salem branch, were behind these grillings and were using them as a way of getting back at Shaykh Sabah. At the very least, the constant threats of grillings are distracting the Government from other, more important issues.

17. (C/NF) In this context, a few liberal contacts have suggested that an unconstitutional dissolution might be exactly what the country needs and the only way to break the current political impasse. Recent front-page editorials in two leading newspapers seemed to imply as much. While admitting that an unconstitutional dissolution would be unpopular, those supporting such a step claim the Amir would be given a year-long grace period in which to implement reforms. They acknowledge, however, that an unconstitutional dissolution would only improve the situation if - and it is a big if - the Government can deliver on much-needed reforms, something it has so far failed to do.

Where Are We Going?

18. (C/NF) Kuwaitis' main criticism of the Amir, expressed in private, is that he has so far failed to outline a clear vision for the country's future. While Kuwait's economy continues to be buoyed by strong oil revenues, Kuwaitis feel vulnerable to regional security pressures, and often have the sense that Kuwait is falling behind other Gulf countries. Kuwaitis largely blame these problems on the Government's failure to take serious steps to address rampant corruption and implement much-needed institutional and administrative reforms to increase transparency and efficiency in providing government services. These failures, coupled with the Government's mismanagement of several political crises, have opened the door for opposition elements, most notably Islamists, to step in and outline their own vision for Kuwait that addresses these issues in some ways. Some Kuwaitis are starting to argue more vocally for the legalization of political parties and for Parliament to be allowed to choose the Prime Minister, reforms which could impinge on the Al-Sabah's leadership role in Kuwait. It is important to note, though, that few, if any, Kuwaitis support a major change in the Al-Sabah's leadership role and their criticism is directed primarily at the Al-Sabah's mismanagement of the country's resources.

19. (C/NF) Shaykh Sabah's challenge now is to outline and implement a broadly appealing strategy for the country and

KUWAIT 00000172 003 OF 003

sell it to an increasingly assertive and uncooperative Parliament while at the same time navigating through regional tensions. In an address to Parliament on January 29, the Amir called on Kuwaitis to avoid sectarianism, work as a team, and practice "good citizenship." He also expressed his desire to improve the educational system and transform Kuwait into "a distinguished regional financial center," but did not explain how he hoped to achieve these goals. If the Amir does lay out a clear vision and moves to reign in government excesses, most parliamentarians and political groups are likely to lend their support to him. Kuwait's society is fundamentally conservative, and the majority of Kuwaitis understand the connection between stability and the extraordinary economic success they have enjoyed. Above all else, our contacts stress, Kuwaitis want a steady hand at the wheel.

For more reporting from Embassy Kuwait, visit:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/kuwait/?cable s>

Visit Kuwait's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/kuwait/>
